Q: You started writing at 17. What influenced you to become a writer?

A: Something that I remember very well – reading. Although in my childhood, there were no books for children except detective stories (laughs). We didn't have literature yet for children like we have now, and detective stories were all we had. I didn't have any choice really (laughs again).

Q: Your novels often feature families with problems: children who want to leave home, parents who don't get along, etc. Is this based on your life as a child?

A: Not necessarily. I may write about some problems in the family, or the city, or any problems that I know about through the papers. I consider myself very happy. Of course, when I was a child, I was not so happy because school was like prison to me, and so on. But in comparison to other families, I must consider my childhood very good.

Q: How do you feel obtaining international success at this stage in your life?

A: Very astonished, really, because I didn't think about it.

Q: Hasn't winning the Nobel changed your life?

A: No. I am at the summit of my age, so change is very difficult now. Perhaps it has changed the life of my family, yes, but not mine. They've become more safe financially, but I have the same life. I still go to the Ali Baba (a café in downtown Cairo) every morning to look at the press: newspapers and magazines. I must walk every morning for about an hour.

Q: You were recently threatened to death by Islamic fundamentalists who took issue with "Children of Gabalawi," a novel you wrote over 20 years ago. (The novel was also brought out in English as "Children of the Alley.") In it, the prophet Mohammed, as well as Jesus and Moses, are symbolized by characters – a symbolization that some said blasphemed Islam. You're not worried?

A: No. And I refuse the (government's offer of) private security guards. If they really wanted to kill me, they would have. They aren't menacing at all. They have more serious aims than to worry about me (laughs).

Q: So there's a difference between "Gabalawi" and Salman Rushdie's "Satanic Verses"?

A: Yes, although the extremists believe they are the same.

Q: What do you think of Salman Rushdie's situation?

A: Salman Rushdie, in fact – his book contains insults against Islam. I haven't read Rushdie's (but) I've heard about it. All of the TV and radio people who interview me about him haven't read him either. I've heard and read that the book contains insolence against Islam. In comparison to my book, I haven't any insolence against any religion. But I present some views for the history of humanity as I imagined it. Perhaps I took freedom in treatment, which disturbed men of religion.

Q: You've been known to speak out on politics. What do you think about prospects for peace in the Middle East?

A: All Arabs want peace, and at least half of Israel does, so I am somewhat optimistic. It's possible to resolve the Palestinian problem without any danger to Israel.

Q: Have you ever thought about running for political office?'

A: No. I think about (politics). I write about it. But as a writer.

Q: Are you working on any new novels?

A: After winning the Nobel Prize, I wrote some short stories, not yet collected or published.

Q: Why?

A: Because my sight and hearing are very weak. I can't work through all the day more than two hours – one for reading, and one for writing. Before, I would write about three hours and read about four or five hours.

Q: What do you think of modern literature?

A: I'm from the generation of Hemingway. I read many of the new books that have been translated into French and English, and they aren't the measure of the forerunners. It's not in the same level of the period of the first century to this half – Satre and Camus.

Q: The Egypt you write about in many of your novels – the Egypt of the early and middle parts of this century – has changed, don't you feel?

A: To a certain extent, it's not the same. Women are working more now, becoming more involved in society. Also, every day we lose readers. Perhaps it's the influence of television and other changes.

Q: What do you hope English-speaking audiences get out of your novels?

A: I hope that they find it literature (laughs). Just as you read Dickens to know London or Balzac to know Paris, there is a real joy. This is the first aim; everything else is secondary. It may be very important to know the daily life of a foreign culture, but the first aim must be artistic.

Q: And do you think they'll discover the characters in your novels are a little like them?

A: Yes, perhaps. They (the characters) may wear strange clothes, and some of them are heavier, but perhaps they have the same nature.